THE AUCTION BLOCK

A Novel of New York Life

By REX BEACH

CHAPTER XIX—Continued.
—12—

Bob acquiesced, glad to escape even in company with his redoubtable brother-in-law. When he and Jim had gone Mrs. Knight addressed Lorelei with motherly candor.

"He's a pleasant fellow, of course, and he's crazy about you; but don't let's be sentimental. If there's no chance to make it up with his family we must get out of this mess and save what we can."

"Was Mr. Wharton very angry?"

"Was he?" Mrs. Knight rolled her eyes in mingled rage and despair. "I'm positively sick over the things he said. Everybody seems to be against us, and —I'm almost ready to give up. But at least that old crank will surely stretch his offer to keep his name off the billboards. Fifteen or twenty thousand is better than—" Noting the shadow of a smile upon her daughter's lips, she checked her rush of words. "You don't seem to care what—"

"I don't."

Mrs. Knight's face twisted into an expression of pained incredulity. "Surely you don't mean to live with Bob?" she gasped. "Not—now."

"I do mean to."

The mother's lips parted, closed, parted again—she seemed to taste something unspeakably bitter. "My dear! Why, my dear! He hasn't a cent. It's absurd. The marriage was only a form. You're no more his wife in the sight of God than—"

"Let's not talk about God," cried Lorelei. "That ceremony was scarcely legal, not to speak of religion or decency."

"You've lost your mind! You've changed completely."

"Yes, I have. You see, I wasn't a wife until yesterday—until Bob and I had an understanding. I've had a suspicion that my old ideas were wrong, and they were."

"Fiddle-de-dee! You're hysterical. You can't make me believe you learned to love that man."

"I don't say I love him."

Mrs. Knight snorted her triumph loudly. "Then you mustn't live with him another moment. My dear child, such a relationship is—well, think it out for yourself."

Lorelei saw the futility of argument, but certain thoughts demanded expression, and she voiced them, as much for her own sake as for her mother's. "I've learned that marriage is more than I considered it, mother. It's an obligation. I intend to live up to my part just as long as Bob lives up to his. If he complained of the fraud we practiced on him I'd be willing to leave him; but he doesn't—so the matter is out of our hands."

Mrs. Knight relieved her steadily increasing anger by a harsh outburst.

"I never thought you could be so silly, after the way you were raised. Didn't we give up everything for you? Didn't Peter sacrifice his life's work to give you an opportunity?"

"I'll keep on sharing my salary with you."

"Salary!" Mrs. Knight spat out the word. "After all our pains! Salary!"

"You're probably just as honest in your ideas as I am in mine," Lorelei told her. "I sha'n't allow you to want for—"

"I should hope not, since you're to blame for Peter's condition— Oh, you know you are! If you hadn't wanted a career he'd still be in Yale, a strong, healthy man instead of a cripple."

"I didn't want a career," Lorelei denied with heat. "And father almost had to leave Yale."

"Nothing of the sort. He was a big man there. 'Had to leave Yale,' eh? So you've turned against your own blood, and disparage your father— Anyhow, he was hurt while he was working to give you a start, and now he's helpless. Ten thousand dollars right now would save his life. Think that over, when your own father is dead and gone."

White with anger, sick with disappointment, Mrs. Knight whisked herself out of the apartment.

Strangely enough, the news of Bob Wharton's marriage had not leaked into the papers up to this time, and Lorelei, having regard for the feelings of his parents, insisted that he help her to keep the matter secret as long as possible. Bob rebelled at first, for he adored publicity. He rejoiced in his newest exploit and desired his world to hear of it, while the prospect of further mortifying his father was so agreeable that it required much persuasion to make him relinquish it. With her own family Lorelei had less difficulty, for they were by no means eager to advertise their bad bargain and had withdrawn behind a stiff restraint, leaving the couple to their own devices. This attitude spared the bride much unpleasant notoriety, enabling her to pursue her work at the theater without comment.

Bob's society proved in some ways a welcome change from the sordid drabness of her own relatives, for he was colorful, versatile, and nearly always good humored. Misfortune aroused in him a wild hilarity; cares excited mirth. Lorelei realized before long that this very jocundity of his, since it fed upon constant change and excitement, constituted the gravest menace to their happiness. The man lived entirely outside of himself; he utterly lacked the power of self-amusement. He refused to frequent the theater, ostensibly because of their secret, in reality because of his shame at allowing her to work. As Lorelei came to know him better and to understand the conflicting forces within him, she began to wonder how long he could hold himself true to his bargain.

During the first week of their married life his system struggled to throw off the effects of his recent dissipations, and in consequence it craved only rest. Greatly encouraged by this lack of desire, he boasted that the battle was already won, and Lorelei pretended to agree with him.

She did not deceive herself, however, and a brief experience convinced her that to be merely a wife to one of Bob's vagrant disposition was not enough; that in order to keep his new self alive she must also be his sweetheart, his chum, and his partner. If she failed in any one of these roles disaster was bound to follow. But to succeed in them all, when there was no love to strengthen her, was by no means easy. Always she felt a great emptiness, and a disappointment that her life had been so crookedly fashioned: sometimes she even felt degraded, and wondered if she were doing right, after all.

In the course of a fortnight Bob began to grow restless. One evening when he came for her she saw that he was nervous; a strained, tired look had crept into his eyes, and she thought she understood. Nevertheless his spirits were ebullient. When they reached home he ushered her into the apartment with a flourish, and Lorelei was amazed to find their table set with strange linen, silver and china and the dining room decorated as if for a party.

"Death Valley Has Nothing on This Place," He Mourned.

"Who's coming? What on earth?" she exclaimed.

"A little surprise. A supper for just you and me, my dear."

It was one of his whims. During the meal he made elaborate speeches in the names of his friends. His imaginary guests congratulated him; in empty glasses they toasted the bride, they extolled her beauty, they praised his own gallantry, and vaunted his conquest of the demon rum. But when all traces of the feast had disappeared he swooped down out of the clouds and confessed miserably:

"I thought I could kid myself, but I can't. I want a drink. I—want—a—drink! God! how I want it!"

Lorelei went swiftly to him. "The fight is just beginning, Bob. You're doing nobly."

"It isn't thirst," he explained, and she saw that same strained uneasiness in his bright eyes. "I'm not thirsty—I'm shaky inside. I get tired of fighting."

Lorelei nodded sympathetically. "That's why it's so hard to reform: one's conscience tires, but temptation is always fresh. You must keep busy."

"I'm going to work."

"No, no! Not yet," she cried, quickly. "You must fight it out where I can help."

Bob smiled gratefully. "You're a thoroughbred. I promised to let you have your way, and you shall. Even if we lose the patient it will be a dandy operation."

For the first time in her life Lorelei really worked, and worked not for herself, but for another. Although the experience was interesting in its novelty, the result remained unsatisfactory, for not only did love fail to respond to these sacrifices, but she could see no improvement in Bob's condition. The thing she fought was impalpable, yet enormous; it was weak, yet strong; it seemed to sleep, yet it was ever awake.

Of necessity the two lived in the closest intimacy, than which nothing is ordinarily more fatal to domestic happiness. But Bob was unique; he did not tire; he began to rely upon Lorelei as a sick man leans upon his nurse, and to worship her as a man worships his sweetheart. There was more than passion in his endearments now.

But it was discouraging to the girl, who gained no strength from her penance and derived no satisfaction whatever in service for service's sake. The whole arrangement tried her patience desperately; she was weary in mind and body, and looked back with regret upon her former easy life. There was no time now for recreation—Bob had to be amused. Salary day assumed a new importance, and she began to count the cost of every purchase.

So spring went and midsummer came. It was terribly hot in the city; the nights were breathless, the days were glaring, and this heat was especially trying to one in Bob's condition. In his periods of gayety he showered his wife with attentions and squandered every dollar he could borrow in presents for her; in his hours of depression he was everything strange, morose and irritable.

Without her knowledge he applied to his old firm for a salaried position and was refused. He appealed to Merkle with the same result, but succeeded in borrowing a thousand dollars, with which he bought Lorelei a set of black opals, going into debt for half the price.

CHAPTER XX.

Lorelei's family continued to smart under a sense of bitter injustice, but although they kept aloof they were by no means uninterested in her experiment. On the contrary, they watched it with derisive enjoyment, predicting certain failure. After Hannibal Wharton's insult Jim was all for a prompt revenge, but he could not determine just how to use his dangerous knowledge to the best advantage. He considered the advisability of enlisting the aid of Max Melcher; but, not liking the thought of dividing the loot, he decided provisionally to engineer a separation between Bob and Lorelei.

His desire to make mischief arose in only a slight degree from resentment—Jim's method of making a living had long since dulled the edge of feeling—it was merely the first step in a comprehensive scheme. With Bob and Lorelei estranged, a divorce would follow, and divorces were profitable. A divorce, moreover, would open the way for a second inroad upon the Wharton wealth, for with Lorelei's skirts clear Jim could proceed with a larger scheme of extortion, based on the Hammon murder.

One evening after Lorelei had gone to the theater Jim appeared at the apartment and found Bob in a mood so restless and irritable that he dared not go out.

"I had a hunch you were lonesome," the caller began, "so I came up to whittle and spit at the stove."

Now Jim could be agreeable when he chose: his parasitic life had developed in him a certain worldly good-fellowship; he was frankly unregenerate, and he had sufficient tact never to apologize nor to explain. Therefore he kept Bob entertained.

A few nights later he returned with a fund of new stories, and during the evening he confessed to a consuming thirst.

"Death valley has nothing on this place," he mourned.

Bob explained apologetically, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing in the house wetter than Croton water."

"I understand! Will you object if I sweeten a glass of it with some Scottish rites? I'm afraid of germs, and if water rots leather think what it must do to the sensitive lining of a human stomach?" Jim drew a flask from his pocket, then hesitated as if in doubt.

"Don't mind me," Bob assured him, hastily. "I'm strapped in the driver's seat." But he looked on with eager appreciation as his brother-in-law filled a long glass and sipped it.

Bob had never been a whisky-drinker, yet the faint odor of the liquor tantalized him. When in the course of time he saw Jim preparing a second drink he stirred.

"Kind of itchy, eh? Let's whip across the street and have a game of pool," suggested Jim; and Bob was glad to escape from the room.

An agreeable hour followed; but Bob played badly, and found that his eye had lost its sureness. His hand was uncertain, too, and this lack of co-ordination disgusted him. He was sure that with a steadying drink he could beat Jim, and eventually he proved it; but, mindful of his resolution, he compromised on beer, which, Jim agreed, could not reasonably be called an intoxicant.

On his way to the theater Bob chewed cinnamon bark, and when he kissed Lorelei he held his breath.

This was the first of several pool matches, and after a while Bob was gratified to find that beer in moderation left no disagreeable effect whatever upon him. He rejoiced in his power of restraint.

There came a night when he failed to meet his wife. After waiting nearly half an hour Lorelei went home, only to find the apartment deserted. She nibbled at a lonely lunch, trying to assure herself that nothing was seriously amiss; but she could not make up her mind to go to bed. She tried to read, and failed. An hour passed, then another; a thousand apprehensions crowded in upon her.

Bob, when he did arrive, entered with elaborate caution. He paused in the little hall, then tossed his hat into the living room, where his wife was waiting. After a moment his head came slowly into view, and he said:

"When the hat stays in, go in; when it comes out, beat it."

Lorelei saw that he was quite drunk.

"I just came from the theater," he explained, "but it was dark. Has the show failed, dearie?" He tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away. "Come! Must have my little kiss," he insisted as she rose and moved away, leaving him swaying in his tracks.

Studying Lorelei's unsmiling face his tone altered. "Oh, I know! I slipped, but it couldn't be helped. Nature insisted, and I yielded gracefully; but no harm done, none whatever. Life is a series of compromises. Moderation is the thing. Live and let live."

Lorelei nodded. "Exactly! We shall live as we choose, only, of course, we can't live together after this." Then her disgust burst its control, and she demanded, bitterly, "Haven't you any strength whatever? Haven't you any balance, Bob?"

He grinned at her cheerfully. "I should say I had. I walked a fence on the way home just to prove it; and I scarcely wabbled. Balance! Strength! Why, you ought to see Jim. They had to carry him."

"Jim? Was—Jim with you?"

"In spirit, yes; in body—only for a time. For a brief while we went gayly, hand in hand, then Jim lagged. He's a nice boy, but weak; he falters beneath a load."

She questioned him searchingly and soon learned of Jim's visits, of the flask, of the pool games. When she understood it all her eyes were glowing, but she found nothing to say. At last she got Bob to bed, then lay down beside him and stared into the darkness through many wakeful hours.

In the morning he was not only contrite, but badly frightened, yet when he undertook to make his peace he found her unexpectedly mild.

"If you're sorry, that's all I ask," she said. "I changed my mind during the night."

"Never again!" he promised, feelingly. "I thought I had cured myself."

Lorelei smiled at him faintly. "Cured! It took ten years to work the damage—it will probably take ten years to repair it."

Bob was aghast. "Good heavens! In ten years I'll be too old to drink—I'd tremble so that I'd spill it. But where did you get this dope?"

"I've been reading. I've been talking to a doctor, too. You see, I wanted to help."

"Let's change doctors. Ten years! It can't be done."

"I'm afraid you're right. There's no such thing as reformation. If you're a born alcoholic you'll probably die a drunkard. I'm hoping that you didn't inherit the taste."

"Well, whether it was left to me or whether I bought it, I can't go dry for ten years."

"Then our bargain is ended."

He looked up sharply. "Oh no, it isn't!"

"Yes."

He extended a shaking hand, and his voice was supplicating as he said: "I can't get along without you, kid. You're a part of me—the vital part. I'd go to pieces quick if you quit now."

"When we made our agreement I meant to live up to every bit of it," Lorelei told him, gently, "but we're going to try again, for this was Jim's fault."

"Jim? Jim was sorry for me. He tried to cheer—"

Lorelei's smile was bitter. "Jim was never sorry for anybody except himself. My family hate you just as your family hate me, and they'd like to separate us."

"Say, that's pretty rotten!" Bob exclaimed. "If he weren't your brother I'd—"

Lorelei laughed mirthlessly. "Go ahead! I wish you would. It might clear the atmosphere."

"Then I will." After a moment he continued, "I suppose you feel you must go on supporting them?"

"Of course."

"Just as you feel you must support me. Is it entirely duty in my case?" Seeing her hesitate, he insisted, "Isn't there any love at all?"

"I'm afraid not, Bob."

The man pondered silently. "I suppose if I were the right sort," he said, at length, with some difficulty, "I'd let you go under these circumstances. Well, I'm not the right sort; I'm not big or noble. If Barleycorn brothers lick me I'll go under. But if I go under I'll take you with me. I won't give you up. I won't!"

"I sha'n't let you pull me down," she told him, soberly.

When Bob reached the financial district next day and resumed his quest for work he was ablaze with resentment at himself and at the world in general.

He took up the search with a dogged determination that was quite unlike him. One after another he canvassed his friends for a position, and finally, as if ill fortune could not withstand his fervor, he was successful. It was not much of a job that was offered him, but he snapped at it, and returned home that evening in the best of humor. Already the serious issues of the morning were but a memory; he burst in upon Lorelei like a gale, shouting:

"I'm chalk-boy at Crosset & Meyers, so you can give Bergman your notice tonight."

"What's the salary?"

"It isn't a salary; it's a humiliation—twenty-five a week is the total insult."

"Why, Bob! That won't keep two and the family—"

"The family!" He quieted himself with an effort. "Well, you give your notice, anyhow. I'll spear the coin for both establishments somehow. Come! I insist. I want to be able to shave myself without blushing."

Lorelei's objections were not easily overcome, but at last, in view of the fact that the summer run of the Revue was drawing to a close and the show would soon take to the road, she allowed herself to be persuaded.

Throughout the next week Bob Wharton really tried to make good. He was enthusiastic; the excitement of actual accomplishment was so novel that he had not time to think of liquor. When Saturday came and he found himself in possession of honestly earned funds he felt a soul-satisfying ease. He decided to invest his first savings in a present for Lorelei, then a graver sense of responsibility seized him, and he sent them to Mrs. Knight. Then he set out to find Jim. At Tony the Barber's shop, in the rear room, he found his brother-in-law playing cards with a pop-eyed youth and a repellent person with a cauliflower ear.

Bob's greeting was hearty. "Evening, James," he cried. "Feel like taking your beating here?"

"Eh? What's the matter?" Jim rose from his chair with a shocked intensity of gaze.

"I've come to return your last call. Alas, James, I am a weak vessel! Your work was coarse, but I fell for it." To the other occupants of the room he apologized. "I'm sorry to spoil your little game of authors, but necessity prods me." He extended a muscular hand for Jim's collar and found it.

Mr. Armistead was of the emotional kind; he went to the rescue of his friend; but when Bob's fist buried itself in the spongy region of Mr. Armistead's belt buckle that young man promptly lost all interest in Jimmy Knight's affairs. He sat down heavily, desperately concerned with a strange difficulty in breathing.

Alert, aggressive, Bob turned to face the man with the swollen ear; but young Sullivan, being a professional fighter, made no capital of amateur affairs, and declined the issue with an upraised palm.

It was no difficult matter to chastise Jim, whose spirit was as wretched as his strength; as the wind whips a

"We Can't Afford to Antagonize the Whole Steel Trust."

flag, as a man flaps a dusty garment, so did Bob shake his victim. Jim struggled, he clawed, he kicked, he yelled; his arms threshed loosely, like the limber appendages to a stuffed figure.

When Bob emerged from the rear room he found the barber shop in confusion. Tony was leading a charge, but he fell back at sight of the flushed victor.

"It was nothing but a little family affair," Bob reassured him. "Now, if you please, I'll borrow a hairbrush." In front of a mirror he tidied himself, settled his scarf with a deft jerk, then went out whistling. As it was nearly closing time for the matinees, he strolled toward the Circuit theater, full of a satisfying contentment with the world. Now that he owed it nothing, he resolved to meet his future obligations as they arose.

Early on Monday morning Bob reported for work, only to receive from Mr. Crosset, whom he had always regarded as a warm friend, the notice of his discharge.

"What's the matter? Didn't I make good?" he demanded.

Crosset was a young man; more than once he and Bob had scandalized Broadway; some of their exploits were epic. Now he shrugged carelessly, saying:

"Oh, you made good, I guess; but we can't take a chance with you."

"I suppose you're afraid I'll steal some of your chalk. Now tell me, how did you wet your feet, and whence comes the icy draft?"

"Well, from the direction of Pittsburgh, if you must know. There's a can tied to you, and we can't afford to antagonize the whole steel trust."

"I see. I'm afraid I'll have to disown that father of mine."

"What's the trouble, anyhow?"

At Bob's explanation Crosset whistled. "Funny I didn't hear about it. Married and happy, eh? Well, I'm sorry I can't help you—"

"You can. Lend me five hundred."

"Certainly!" Crosset lunged at his desk, scribbled a line to the cashier, and handed it to Bob, then, in response to a call from the customers' room, dashed away with a hearty farewell.

As Bob passed through the outer office he ran his eye over the opening prices, being half inclined to "scalp" with his sudden wealth; but luck had never run his way, and he reconsidered. Anyhow, there were more agreeable uses to which he could put this money; for one thing, he needed several suits, for another, it was high time he gave Lorelei some little remembrance—he hadn't given her a present in nearly two weeks, and women set great store by such attentions. He decided to invest the money in Maiden lane and demand credit from his tailor. But a half-hour at a jewelry shop convinced him that nothing suitable to so splendid a creature as his wife could be purchased for a paltry five hundred dollars, and he was upon the point of returning to Crosset with a request to double the loan when his common sense asserted itself. Poverty was odious, but not shameful, he reflected; ostentation, on the other hand, was vulgar. Would it not be in bad taste to squander this happy windfall upon jewelry when Lorelei needed practical things?

Bob was cheered by the breadth of these sentiments; they showed that he was beginning soberly to realize the leaden responsibilities of a family man. No, instead of a jewel he would buy his wife a dog.

At a fashionable uptown kennel he found exactly what he wanted, in the shape of a Pekingese—a playful, pedigreed pocket dog scarcely larger than his two fists. It was a creature to excite the admiration of any woman; its family tree was taller than that of a Spanish nobleman, and its name was Ying. But here again Bob was handicapped by poverty, for sleeve dogs are expensive novelties, and the price of Ying was seven hundred dollars—marked down from one thousand, and evidently the bargain of a lifetime at that price.

Bob hated to haggle, but he showed that his ability to drive a sharp bargain was merely latent, and he finally bore the animal away in triumph. To outgeneral a dog fancier was a tribute to his shrewdness; to save two hundred dollars on a single purchase was economy of a high order. Much elated, he set out briskly for his tailor's place of business.

CHAPTER XXI.

It still lacked something of luncheon time when Bob Wharton swung into Fifth avenue. He was in fine fettle with the certainty of an agreeable hour with his tailor. It was always a pleasure to deal with Kurtz, for in his shop customers were treated with the most delicate consideration. Salesmen, cutters, fitters, all were pleasant acquaintances. Kurtz himself was an artist; he was also a person of generally cultivated taste and a man about town. His books were open only to those he considered his equals. A stony-faced doorman kept watch and ward in the Gothic hallway to discourage the general public from entering the premises. The fact that Bob owed several hundred dollars dismayed that young man not in the least, for Kurtz never mentioned money matters.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Wants to Know Why.

Why is it that a careless seven-year-old boy can drop a half-burned match in an alley and burn up all the barns in the block, while an able-bodied man has to use up a box of matches to get a wood fire started in a heater that has draft enough to draw all the furniture up the stovepipe?—Lebanon Times.